

ADOPTING A FAMILY APPROACH

Short Guide Series

Children of Parents with Mental Health Needs



Mental health problems are common. There is no single clear definition and therefore mental health problems alone should not be taken as a risk factor without contextual information.

The state of a person's mental health is changeable and can be affected by various factors. Therefore their capacity to parent safely may also be variable, and therefore, an understanding of the factors which may increase risk is an important part of any assessment.

Which children are at risk?

A child who has suffered, or is likely to suffer Significant Harm or whose well-being is affected by parental mental illness could be a child:

- Who features within parental delusions;
- Who is involved in his / her parent's obsessional compulsive behaviours;
- Who becomes a target for parental aggression or rejection;
- Who has caring responsibilities inappropriate to his / her age and should be assessed as a young carer;
- Who may witness disturbing behaviour arising from the mental illness;
- Who is neglected physically and / or emotionally by an unwell parent;
- Who is at risk of severe injury, profound neglect or death;
- Who is an unborn child of a pregnant woman with any previous major mental illness.

How can a child be affected by parental mental ill health?

Consider the following when making an assessment of parenting ability and the child's development / needs:

- Does the child take on roles and responsibilities within the home that are inappropriate?
- Does the parent/carer neglect their own and their child's physical and emotional needs?



- Does the parent's mental health problem affect the development of a secure attachment with the child?
- Does the mental health problem result in chaotic structures within the home with regard to meal and bedtimes, etc.?
- Does the parent/carer's mental health have implications for the child within school, attending health appointments etc.?
- Is there a lack of the recognition of safety for the child?
- Does the parent/carer have an appropriate understanding of their mental health problem and its impact on their parenting capacity and on their child?
- Are there repeated incidents of hospitalisation for the parent/carer or other occasions of separation from the child?
- Is the child included within any delusions of the parent/carer?
- Does the wider family understand the mental health problem of the parent/carer, and the impact of this on the parent/carer's ability to meet the child's needs?
- Is the wider family able and willing to support the parent so that the child's needs are met?

Protection and Escalation

Where it is believed that a child of a parent with mental health problems may have suffered, or is likely to suffer significant harm, a referral to Children's social care should be made. Please see the contacts page on this toolkit for information on how to refer a concern.

If you are working with a child and have concerns about an adult carer who may have mental health needs, please see the contacts page on this toolkit for information on how to refer a concern.

It is essential that staff working in adult mental health services and Children's social care work together collaboratively to ensure the safety of the child and management of the adult's mental health.

Children's social care must assess the individual needs of each child and within this incorporate information provided by mental health workers.

For further information please see the 4LSCB guide on [Children of Parents with Mental Health Needs](#) and the [4LSCB Protocol on Children of Parents with Learning Disabilities](#).

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